RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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REFUGEE HOUSING INFORMATION NEEDS: RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN THE REGION OF NIAGARA

INTRODUCTION

The Peace Bridge between Canada and the United States at Fort Erie, Ont. is Canada s highest-volume entry point for refugees seeking asylum in Canada. Since 2000, an average of more than 5,000 refugees per year have entered the country at Fort Erie, with a peak in 2001 of 7,070 the largest number at any point of entry in Canada. Since 1998, the number of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie has climbed by approximately 400 per cent, compared to a Canada-wide increase of about 60 per cent.

The increase has put tremendous pressure on the demand for low-cost rental housing in the region. The four objectives of this research were: to identify the current housing situation of refugees who choose to stay in the Niagara region (Fort Erie, Welland, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls), the housing options available to them, their housing information needs, and how these needs can be met.

METHODOLOGY

There were three components of the study methodology.

1. **Secondary data analysis**: The work included analysis of refugee data from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), population and labour force data from Statistics Canada, housing data from Niagara Regional Housing and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) Rental Market Survey, data on refugee characteristics from the Fort Erie Reception Centre and client statistics from non-profit organizations.
2. **Consultations**: Most of the information for the research was collected through 37 in-depth interviews with representatives of 15 local and federal governments, 11 multicultural centres and others in the network of service providers and 11 housing and housing-information providers.
3. **Focus groups with refugees**: Researchers conducted two focus groups in Fort Erie with 15 refugees representing several countries of origin. The discussions covered their current housing situation, experiences finding housing and housing information needs.

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FINDINGS

Profile of refugees arriving at Fort Erie

Numbers of refugees—Fort Erie is the busiest entry point in Canada for refugees. CIC statistics show that the number of refugees claiming asylum at Fort Erie has increased from 1,229 in 1998 to an average of over 5,000 per year since 2000:

- 4,705 in 2000;
- 7,070 in 2001;
- 5,013 in 2002; and,
- 3,293 for the first seven months of 2003.

Country of origin—In the last three years, the top six countries of origin for refugees were Colombia, Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh, Argentina, and Sri Lanka.

Number of refugees who stay in Niagara—Using respondent reports and data collected by the Fort Erie Reception Centre, an estimated 15 to 25 per cent of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie remain in the Niagara region. Most of the rest go immediately to Toronto or other centres in southern Ontario.

Educational achievement— Most of the recently arrived adult refugees are well educated. Data from the Fort Erie Reception Centre for the first six months of 2003 show the following levels of educational achievement (the numbers total 99 per cent because of rounding):

- 34 per cent have a university degree;
- 19 per cent have a college degree;
- 25 per cent have a high school diploma; and,
- 21 per cent have some high school, primary school or trade school (or did not list an educational level).

Employment and income in the first year—Acquiring medical and immigration approvals for work eligibility takes a minimum of six months. Most refugees do not work within the first 12 months after arriving in Canada. The length of time depends on factors such as language ability, recognition of foreign credentials and the local job market. During pre-employment, individual or household income comes from social assistance (Ontario Works), which includes a housing allowance.

HOUSING OPTIONS

Temporary shelters provide short-term housing—Most refugees remaining in the Niagara region stay in temporary shelters and hostels on their first night and typically stay in a shelter for one to two months. Five shelters in the region, with approximately 80 spaces, operate with formal funding agreements with the Regional Municipality of Niagara. Several other shelters operate without funding agreements. Shelter space has not been sufficient to meet demand in recent years and refugees are often sent to hotels and motels. Most shelters provide support services, such as settlement counselling and help finding longer-term housing and employment.

The private rental market provides most longer-term housing—Almost all refugees find housing in the private rental market once they leave a temporary shelter. The shortage of rental housing in the Niagara region that refugees can afford is acute, particularly in the smaller communities. Few new rental units have been built in recent years and market rents have increased, particularly in Fort Erie (by 5.3 per cent in 2002).

CMHC Rental Market Survey statistics show that market rents for about three-quarters of the units in the region are higher than refugees' shelter allowances, which have not changed for several years. Service providers identified the gap between market rents and shelter allowances as the biggest obstacle to better housing for refugees. Settlement counsellors estimate that they have great difficulty finding housing that meets basic needs and standards for about 20 to 25 per cent of refugees. The affordability problem is most serious during the transition period after refugees leave temporary shelter until they find employment and earn enough to pay market rent.

Subsidized housing plays a limited role in the first year—Few refugees live in publicly subsidized housing during the first year after arriving in Niagara. Some units in Niagara Regional Housing properties, the Region's public housing authority, are available almost immediately for refugees with special needs, such as disability or those in situations with family violence. Refugees are encouraged by service organizations to apply for subsidized housing as soon as possible, with the expectation that it might meet the longer-term needs of refugees with poorer employment prospects.

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A strong local support network provides housing and other services to refugees—The Niagara region offers a strong local support network for refugees. This network includes the housing shelters, the Fort Erie Reception Centre (receiving all new arrivals at the Peace Bridge), three multicultural centres, local school boards, partners in the Niagara Homelessness Initiative, Niagara Regional Housing and many other service organizations. These organizations operate without assistance from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which does not provide funding for refugees. Active involvement by the Ontario government in refugee services also is very limited. Ontario's main contribution is funding 80 per cent of the *per diem* allocation for temporary shelter spaces (with the Region of Niagara providing the other 20 per cent).

The support network services include temporary shelter, settlement counselling, searching for rental housing, assistance with health and legal matters, English language training and school placement for children.

HOUSING INFORMATION NEEDS AND SOURCES

Information for refugees—Once short-term shelter needs have been met, refugees want up-to-date information on rental housing options, the rights and obligations of tenants and landlords, total rental costs, subsidized housing options and housing availability in their current city and other cities. Many refugees want information, simply presented, in languages other than English. Information about purchasing a home is not an immediate priority for refugees, although many see homeownership as an important goal to be achieved after they have found employment and become more settled.

Information for service providers—Service providers want better access to translation and interpretation services to improve their capacity to deliver services in the languages spoken by refugees. They want to reduce the risks to refugees of problems related to language barriers and cultural differences. Mental health services also are a priority, with better information about available services and how to access them needed for refugee clients. Service providers said that they would benefit from more information about CMHC products, services and programs.

Counsellors are the most useful source of housing information—Most refugees rely on the temporary shelters and multicultural centres for information about housing during their first few weeks. Refugees and service providers alike strongly agreed that direct communications between refugees and settlement counsellors and other service providers is the most effective means of helping refugees to make a successful early transition to life in Canada. Printed information becomes more useful once refugees are ready to enter the private rental market. Municipal libraries, which provide access to newspapers and the Internet, are an important source of information about Canada and Canadian culture. Informal communications networks among friends, other refugees and members of the same ethnic or national community are strengthening as communities of former refugees become better established in the region.

Service providers see a valuable role for CMHC as an information provider—Service providers say CMHC can contribute to refugee settlement and affordable housing in two ways:

- Providing expert knowledge and practical information on experience with affordable housing projects to help the local housing sector develop an affordable housing strategy; and,
- Supplying service providers with CMHC housing information that could be useful to refugees and to organizations assisting refugees.

CONCLUSION

Higher numbers of refugees arriving in the Niagara region over the last five years have increased the demand for lower-cost housing in the region—a demand for which the supply has not kept pace. Market rents for the available stock have increased and little new rental stock has been built. With shelter allowances fixed for several years, increased rental housing costs have made it more difficult for refugees to make the transition from shelters to the private rental market.

Service providers and community leaders strongly believe that better housing is an essential component of any plan to encourage refugees and other newcomers to stay in the Niagara region. They are confident that improved housing will increase the proportion of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie to stay in Niagara communities instead of leaving for other centres such as Toronto. Improved housing information and communications between refugees and service organizations are important within a broader strategy to meet local affordable housing needs.

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research.

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